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Knapp's Relationship Model and Nutrition

Abstract

The Interpersonal Relationship Development Model first coined by researcher Mark Knapp in 1984 is applied in this study to discover trends between nutritional habits of romantic partnerships and development within the model. It was discovered that food choices became more important to the respondents (111) during the maintaining portion of the model. However, during the coming together and coming apart portions of the model, food choices became less based upon the relationship status or the other person and reverted back to individual choices.

Cover Page Footnote

The Faculty Mentor on this project was Ashley Vasquez, Speech.

One of the best-known models which breaks down the relational stages was developed by Mark Knapp (Floyd). Knapp's relationship development model is mostly used for describing the communication between romantic partners; however, this model can work for other close relationships like family or friends as well. There are ten stages to this model: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, bonding, differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. These stages can be combined together to form three larger sections: coming together, which includes the initiating, experimenting, and intensifying stages, relational maintenance, which includes the integrating, bonding, differentiating, and circumscribing stages, and coming apart which includes the stagnating, avoiding, and terminating stages (Floyd).

There are many things that one can pair with the relationship development model to make sense of relationships, and one of them is food or nutrition. The linking between food and relationships is so strong that there are holidays like Valentine's Day in which food and romance fills the entire day with chocolates and fine-dining dinners. Food and romance is so tightly linked thanks to a complex hormonal reaction that affects our emotional attachments to loved ones — and our need for food (Melnick). Those who are newly dating someone produce an overabundance of “reward hormones” like norepinephrine, which produces feelings of euphoria, giddiness and energy (Melnick). These hormones are one of the reasons why food and relationships go well together.

In the beginning of new relationships, one small milestone may be cooking for a new significant other. Hours go into this first home-cooked meal where the pressure is so high to make the meal perfect. Maryanne Fisher, a professor at Saint Mary's University, says that “the energy and time we invest in buying food and cooking for a new partner shows just how much we like them and is what she calls ‘an inconvenience display’ and it cannot be faked” (Harding).

In these beginning stages, or the coming together stages in Knapp's model, one may go the extra mile to buy nicer food or prepare nicer meals which is not part of their normal routine just to please their new romantic partner (Harding).

As relationships are coming together, dinner dates are very common. Dinner dates allow the two individuals to get to know each other better by talking over a nice meal, but the thing people may be paying attention to more than one may think is how their date is eating their food. Picky eaters can be a turn off for some men, and women may think deeper into why their new date is being so snappy at the waiter (Bala). This can be the opposite as well, where they show up on time and order for both people. Even looking into what the other person orders can tell a lot about them. Aphrodisiacs are agents that arouse or increase sexual response or desire, and they are a common food that people order to stimulate interest in their new date (WebMD). This is one reason why dinner dates are so important, because they show so much more than what meets the eye.

As romantic relationships progress and move up the model, food becomes an important part of relationship maintenance. Sometimes, food becomes so important that it starts changing the two individuals – weight gain. More than sixty percent of people put on a few pounds once they get comfortable in a relationship (Innes). Furthermore, sixty-two percent of people surveyed admitted to gaining almost fifteen pounds since being in a happy relationship (Innes). Think date-nights, going out with friends for drinks, staying in and ordering pizza or chinese food to-go. When people are happy, they are not as worried as they were in the beginning of the relationship of impressing their romantic partners with nice, healthy, home-cooked meals. The weight gain does not go unnoticed either. In the same study, seventy-two percent of people also said that their partner has put on weight as well.

So what is going on with this weight gain during the maintenance phases of Knapp's model? Thirty percent of couples say that their bonding activities are spent in front of a TV eating (Styles). Research has also shown that eating a meal with another person, no matter the relationship to you, can boost the amount of food eaten by up to thirty-three percent (Hobson). Also, the portion sizes need to be taken into consideration. The portion size can be the hardest thing for women, with more than half in the study reporting that they regularly match what their male partner eats (Styles). This can be problematic for women because they do not need as many calories as men do to maintain their current weight, so when they match what their partner is eating, they are taking in too many calories which is leading them to add on some extra pounds.

To lose this relationship weight gain, it is important to look at the relationship between food and the romantic relationship. Twenty percent of couples said that their favorite bonding activity was to eat out together (Innes). If a couple can integrate cooking into their bonding activities, it could help them save some money and some calories, as they won't need to add all the extra salt and fat that most restaurants do. One way to get back into shape is to do it as a couple. Working out with a romantic partner is a good step in the right direction of a healthier body and relationship – even if it is just a walk in the park. Twenty-six percent of people in the survey wish that they had a healthier lifestyle with their partner, so the first step can be to do it together (Innes).

The coming apart stages of Knapp's relationship model include a major event within a romantic relationship – the break up. Break ups are hard, so hard that a small study conducted out of Rutgers University, “found people with broken hearts and people going through cocaine withdrawal have similar brain activity” (Weingus). Furthermore, in a 2011 study participants were shown photos of exes who had broken up with them recently. They found that the same part

of the brain where physical pain is shown had lit up when the photos were shown to the participants (Weingus). When someone is broken up with, their coping strategy may not be to eat. The first thing to happen when someone is broken up with is that their body creates more adrenaline which leads to an increase in cortisol levels. When cortisol levels are high the immune system becomes suppressed, blood pressure is raised, there is a loss of muscle mass and an increase of fat accumulation, and even loss of cognitive function (Weingus). With all of this going on in the body, it is hard to swallow and food may come right back up. Not to mention how heartbreak leads to anxiety, which can cause people to stay at home instead of going out to eat with friends (Weingus). Then there are some people who want to lose the relationship weight and may go on a diet after a break up.

It is no surprise that some people do not eat after break ups, but for others food is comforting, and some can't stop eating it. Eating comfort foods like cupcakes and ice cream releases dopamine which tells makes our bodies happy. People overeat after break ups and do not realize that they may be doing this to avoid reality (Pearson).

The relationship doesn't even need to be your relationship for food to come into play. While reading romantic novels, some women will indulge in eating large amounts of high calorie foods for pleasure and fulfillment due to the novel they are reading (Maher). This indulging event can be linked back to the psychology behind novel reading and food indulgences. The two are both fulfilling, releasing feel-good hormones, which makes people reach for more food as they turn the pages (Maher).

Look into everyday life of a romantic couple. One thing that they might do is go to the movies for a date-night. Not only is this couple going to be eating popcorn, candy, and soda, but

they may also be watching food too. Food has become such a staple in everyday life that we seem to enjoy watching food on commercials or even movies just as much as we enjoy eating it. Just recently, there have been at least three food-romance movies which have come out that ties food with romance on the big screen (Gilbert). This new food in the arts craze only further confirms the idea that food is a very important factor in relationships that may not have been so previously shown.

Method

I developed a twenty-one question survey to find out the relationship between food and nutrition and Mark L. Knapp's relational development model. I geared my study towards specifically romantic relationships as opposed to general relationships to make the subject less broad. I went to Johnson County Community College's Educational Technology (Ed. Tech) where they gave me the username and password to the college's Survey Monkey account. Through Survey Monkey I developed my study with at least one question from each stage in Knapp's relational development model and tied it together with food and nutrition. While creating the survey, I made sure that each question was required to be answered, so that I had equal data for each question. My professor and I also decided it was best to go through the process of IRB to ensure that the questions I used would not offend anyone in any way and that the data I collected was legal to use in this study. I informed participants of this by adding a page before the survey started to ensure that they knew their rights and how their information would be kept confidential. The survey was left opened for 9 days and 111 people took the survey.

Results

The survey controlled for age and gender. Of 111 respondents, 88 were in the age range of 18-29 years old, 15 were in the age range of 30-39 years old, 4 were in the age range of 40-49 years old, and the last 4 were in the age range of 50-59 years old. In total, 44 males took the survey and 64 females took the survey, the other 3 individuals chose to not identify their gender. The survey questions were randomized for the participants taking the survey; however, in this section I will address the numbers as the original questionnaire was set. Every question in the survey was mandatory, so every single question was answered by the 111 respondents.

Coming Together

The coming together section of Knapp's relationship model includes the initiating, experimenting, and intensifying stages. The questions in the survey that correlate to these stages are questions number 1, 2, 3, 11, 12, and 13. In the initiating phase of the relationship, the survey found that around 60 percent (59 percent and 63 percent for questions 1 and 11 respectively) of respondents did not worry too much about how food is interacting within this stage. These 66 respondents chose to eat the protein bar when hungry even while initiating a new relationship for question 1 and 70 respondents in question 11 would eat their danish whether or not they were talking to someone new. One interesting result to note is how even though 66 respondents would eat the protein bar, 34 respondents would wait until after class. Though most respondents would go ahead and eat, there are some who would still be cautious about eating in front of someone even in the earliest stages of a relationship. Overall, nutrition does not seem to matter to the majority in this beginning stage. In the experimenting stage of the relationship, just as the

initiating stage, food does not seem to be the first thing on people's minds. In question 2, 67 percent, or 75 respondents, chose to eat whatever they wanted on a first date, opposed to the 8 percent, or 9 respondents, who chose to eat a salad on the first date. This does not tell us whether or not what they wanted to eat was healthy, but it is showing that more people would eat whatever they wanted versus a salad, which is generally a healthy, nutritious option to eat. On the first date with a new romantic partner (question 12), 66 individuals said that it is not important to like the same food as their date; however, of those 66 individuals, 29 of them said it would matter as the relationship progressed. Adding the 29 respondents who said it would matter later on and the 45 who said that it does matter on the first date to like the same kinds of foods, it totals to be 74 individuals who agree that in the relationship, it is important that both partners like the same food for a healthy, long lasting relationship. The intensifying stage is the last stage of the "coming together" part of the model. In the intensifying stage of a new relationship, a new theme is arising as food is becoming more important. At a work party with your new romantic partner (question 3), only 4.5 percent of respondents, or 5 individuals, would eat nothing at the party and 15 percent, or 17 individuals, would only stick to drinks. The other choices for this question had an even split of respondents, around 20 for each option, but it is important to point out that the next highest percentage (23.4 percent) was eating anything that was healthy over eating shrimp cocktail or cheeseburger sliders. This shows that in this stage of the model, people are becoming more aware of what they are eating in this new relationship. When thinking about going on a date, many people think of food as being part of that date. Question 13 proves this right as when planning a date night for their new romantic partner, 75 respondents mentioned food or dinner as part of this date night. As one gets closer to the relationship maintenance stages of the model, food is becoming increasingly more important.

Maintaining

The maintaining section of Knapp's relationship model includes four stages: integrating, bonding, differentiating, and circumscribing. The questions in the survey that correlate with these stages are questions number 4, 5, 6, 7, 14, and 15. In the integrating stage of the relationship, the survey found that after several months into a particular romantic relationship (question 4) 87 respondents said that even if they did initially, at this stage they would not monitor their eating habits in front of their romantic partners. Many of those 87 respondents went on to say that at this stage in the relationship, one should be comfortable around their romantic partner and should be able to be themselves – which includes their eating habits. Of the 24 who said they would monitor their eating habits in this stage, they mostly said it was due to their own eating preferences, not that they care about what their partner thinks of their eating habits. One part of the integrating stage might be an engagement party, where the romantic partners are introducing the other to their friends or extended family. At an engagement party, only 4 respondents said that they would not provide food for their guests while the other 107 would provide them some kind of food, 55 individuals would give their guests appetizers, 35 individuals would give their guests a large catered meal and 17 individuals would give their guests beer and wings. Generally at occasions like engagement parties, people are drinking and celebrating, so appetizers is a go-to food choice because you can have a few different selections to please all of your guests. Another stage in the relationship maintenance part of the model is the bonding stage, where the couple does things to bring themselves closer. One event that can be a bonding experience for couples is grocery shopping. While grocery shopping with your romantic partner (question 5), 69 percent, or 77 individuals, would buy a little bit of healthy and a little bit of unhealthy food for home. Surprisingly, only 3 respondents said that they would only

buy unhealthy or easy to cook food like pizza, and 21 respondents would only buy healthy food, which shows that at this stage in the relationship it is more about compromise rather than all whatever you want or all whatever they want. When asked why they chose the answer they picked, the 77 individuals who would buy a little of both said that the combination would most likely fit both of the individuals in the relationship. This is one of the happiest stages in the relationship, and having good food to eat that will satisfy both in the relationship is the best way to go. This can be paralleled with the 74 respondents who said that it will matter if you do not like the same kinds of foods as your romantic partner because that could disrupt this bonding stage while grocery shopping if the two partners cannot agree on what to get. If your partner were to bring dinner home and it was a food that you did not like (question 15), 71 respondents said they would reluctantly still try to eat the food where 30 respondents said they would not eat it. Almost half of the respondents on this question also added that it is important to tell your romantic partner that you do not like the food they brought home because there is no point in lying about food at this stage in the relationship. The next stage in the relationship maintaining part of the model is differentiating. Arguing is a natural part of any relationship, and once a romantic relationship has gotten to this stage where arguing is happening more often than not (question 6) 79 respondents said that they would stay at home with their partners and reconnect over a movie night while 32 respondents said that they would go out with friends. The 79 respondents who would stay at home said that reconnecting and staying in would help the relationship more than going out with friends would, since that could possibly lead to more arguing, and by reconnecting over a movie they are going back to the bonding stage of the model. The 32 respondents who said that they would go out with friends said that for them, going out and getting their mind off of things is how they deal with the arguing in relationships,

and this would keep them at the same level on the model or could bring them down a little further to the last stage of the maintenance section: circumscribing. Circumscribing is like when things are a little rocky in the relationship and you do not want to get in another fight (question 7). In this stage at dinner time, when asked if they would see what their significant other wanted or just get something for themselves, 97 of respondents said that they would see what their significant other wanted even if their relationship was a little rocky. Only 14 individuals said that they would eat alone. This large difference in numbers is showing how it doesn't matter if the relationship is rocky, they would rather eat together than eat alone. Of the 97 respondents who would ask their significant other what they wanted, most of them also added on, saying how they would want to confront their significant other and talk it out over food rather than make something for themselves and eat alone. This shows food in a different light – being a “place” or “item” in which a couple can come together and deal with their problems while they are eating. In the relationship maintenance stage of Knapp's model, food is highly intertwined. Unlike the beginning of the stages of coming together where food is not too important, in these middle stages we see food becoming an important part of a couple's everyday lives like grocery shopping, reconnecting, and it's even used as a tool to sit down and talk about things over. In these stages, it is not so much about what the couple is eating, but rather how they are using food to strengthen their romantic relationships.

Coming Apart

The coming apart section in Knapp's relationship model includes 3 stages: stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. The questions from the survey that correlate with these stages are questions number 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, and 18. In the stagnating stage of a romantic relationship, one may be feeling like they are stuck in a rut in their relationship, and they are not completely ready to give

up, but they also are not bonding and maintaining the relationship. When asked what their eating habits look like during this rut stage in a romantic relationship (question 8) 48 respondents said that they would be indulging in chips, pizza, and unhealthy food and the other 63 respondents said that they would be eating healthy foods at this time. The respondents that said that they were eating unhealthy said that because they do not eat well when things are not going okay in relationships. Indulging in comfort foods is something that many do when in an unhappy situation, so it was interesting that more respondents chose to eat healthy. Of those who said they were eating healthy, there are two different explanations for why they would eat healthy. One explanation is that some of the respondents would eat healthy because it makes them feel better about themselves during this rut in their relationship. Others who responded that they would eat healthy said they would do it because they want to look good during this time. Whether they want to look good for their current partners or new partners is still unclear. This stagnating stage may be the stage where you know that it will not last between you and your partner. When asked about going out versus staying in and eating alone at this stage in the relationship where breaking up seems imminent (question 16), 46 respondents said they would go out with friends where 65 respondents said they would stay at home and eat alone. In the “why” part of this question, those who chose to eat alone said that they would not want to get up and get dressed up to go out and would not be in the mood to go out. Those who wanted to go out said that they would need to get their mind off of the situation and going out with friends to blow off steam is a good way to distract. This is similar to the other question in this stage (question 8) because more people decided to stay in which generally is healthier eating than going out would be. These similarities show that during a rough time in a relationship that is dying off, more people are choosing to eat healthy and stay in rather than indulge in unhealthy foods and go out with friends. Another stage

in the coming apart section of the model is avoiding. This is the stage where there is not much communication between the significant others and they avoid talking or even face to face contact. When at this stage in the relationship, question 9 asked if respondents were more likely to go out with friends at this stage or if they were more likely to stay at home and worry about their relationship. Around 54 percent, or 60 respondents, said that they would stay at home and worry where the other 51 respondents said they would go out with friends. Just as the previous stage showed, in this stage the respondents were worried about their relationships and more of them chose to stay at home instead of go out and forget about it, even though it is getting closer to being split 50, 50. Slowly, the data is showing that towards the end, more people are going to start caring less about the break up and going out with friends. Going out with friends means eating fast food and (most likely) drinking alcoholic beverages. At this stage in the model, food is increasingly becoming less important in the sense of the relationship, and it is becoming more of an individual thing rather than a bonding thing. When asked what they (respondents) do to cope with the stress of relationships in these ending stages, 37 individuals said that they would go out with friends to eat and drink, 27 individuals said they would do something healthy for their bodies like relax, exercise, or read a book, and the rest of the respondents said that they would try to talk to their significant others, but if that didn't work it was time to move on. Almost all of the respondents who said that they would try to talk it out, 47 individuals, said that communication is key. When it gets to this stage in the relationship, and communicating isn't happening, that is when the relationship dies off. The final stage to a relationship is the terminating stage. As the name suggests, this is when the relationship is over and the two partners have officially broken off their relationship. When asked how respondents would be eating right after a break up (question 10) 40 respondents said that they would be eating healthy

foods, 12 respondents said that they would be eating how they normally do, or the same as usual, and 59 respondents said that they would be eating unhealthy foods. This is interesting because earlier in the coming apart stage, more people were choosing to eat healthy and stay in and now once the relationship is over, people have switched over to unhealthy foods. Most of the 59 respondents who said that they would be eating unhealthy gave the response that after a break up their emotions are all over the place and that eating unhealthy comfort foods is one of the things that happens after a break up with a romantic partner. Of the respondents who said that they would be eating healthy at this time, they all said the reason was to look and feel good. Question 18 is very similar to question 10, but it asks if respondents change their eating habits right after a break up. Out of the 111 respondents, 64 said that they would not change their eating habits and 47 said that they would change their eating habits. Those who said they would change their eating habits gave the reason that they would want to eat healthy to feel better about themselves. In this final stage of the model, people care about what they are eating until they break up. Once they break up, the eating habits change a bit where some people will be eating healthier and some people may eat unhealthy to cope with the end of a relationship.

The final question asked (question 19) was if people change their eating habits based on the stage of their romantic relationships. Of the 111 respondents, 54 of them said no they do not change their eating habits and 57 said yes they do. Though it is pretty split, more people change their eating patterns because of their relationships than people who don't.

Overall, from the data I have concluded that at the coming together section, food is not very important, and it is usually disregarded. In the relationship maintenance section, food is an important part of keeping the relationship going strong. In the coming apart section, food is not as important again until after the break up, when it is used as a coping mechanism for some.

Further Research

Once gathering data, I realized how much easier this could have been if I had changed the question style. The majority of the questions in my survey were a comment box. After reading through 111 responses over and over again, I found a pattern where many of those comment box questions could have been multiple choice. If I were to create this survey again, I would have utilized multiple choice more often, and on the questions where I wanted more information I would have added a “why” part to the answer. I also realized that my “why” part of the answer was not mandatory, so I had limited data on why people responded the way they did. As my parents were taking this survey, they chose the opposite gender of their own because when they read, “What is your preferred gender?” they read it as, “Which gender do I prefer?” I would have changed the question to ask “What is your gender?” and make it more straightforward. To further know more, someone should create a more detailed survey with my findings and get a larger selection of people to take it. Over half of my respondents were 18-29 and that could be skewing my data.

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